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Election 2020

# Trump Calls Bloomberg 'Criminal' for Helping Florida Felons Vote

By
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- Former New York mayor helping raise money to pay fines
- Florida attorney general asked FBI, FDLE to investigate

Michael Bloomberg Photographer: Matias J. Ocner/Miami Herald/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

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President Donald Trump accused Michael Bloomberg of a “criminal act” on Thursday for helping to pay off debts owed by Florida felons so that they can vote in the November election.

“It’s a felony,” Trump said in a Fox News Radio interview. “He’s actually giving money to people. He’s paying people to vote. He’s actually saying, ‘Here’s money, now you go ahead and vote for only Democrats.’ Right?”

Trump offered no evidence to back up his contention that the effort is intended to get people to vote Democratic or that it's a violation of the law.

The former New York mayor -- who is the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg LP, the parent company of Bloomberg News -- raised about $16 million with a Democratic-associated nonprofit, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, to pay the outstanding court fines, restitution and other costs owed by felons in the state, according to a Bloomberg spokesman. The money didn't come from Bloomberg personally, he said.

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Other donors and fundraisers involved in the effort include singer John Legend, National Basketball Association stars LeBron James and Michael Jordan and companies including Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc., Levi Strauss & Co. and three Florida professional sports teams, the Miami Dolphins, Orlando Magic and Miami Heat, according to FRRC.
The group aims to raise at least $25 million.

In 2018, Florida voters overwhelmingly adopted a ballot initiative restoring felons' right to vote. But the Republican-controlled legislature subsequently passed a law requiring felons to pay off all fines and restitution they owe before registering to cast a ballot.

A federal appeals court upheld the law earlier this month.

Felons who seek to have their fines and fees paid must apply to the FRRC program, which evaluates the applications and works with counties to repay the outstanding costs, said Desmond Meade, the coalition's executive director. The group doesn't care how felons vote, just that they have the right to cast a ballot, he said.

"We're not paying anybody to vote," Meade said Thursday on a conference call with reporters. "When we're talking about taking care of the outstanding legal financial obligations, what we're talking about is removing obstacles that allow people to participate in the democratic process."

Florida's attorney general, Ashley Moody, on Wednesday asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Florida Department of Law Enforcement to investigate Bloomberg's effort to help felons vote, alleging he may be illegally inducing them to vote for Joe Biden.

"We have to have trust in our elections process. It's essential to a strong, stable democracy," Moody, a Republican, said in an interview on Fox News's "Fox & Friends" on Thursday.

"When you hear words like targeting certain voters, investing and adding to a particular column, that doesn't matter what party it is," she said. "That triggers Florida law, which under Florida law, you cannot directly or indirectly give anything of value to persuade or entice a vote."

Bloomberg spokesman Jason Schechter didn't respond directly to Trump, instead referring to a comment Wednesday in response to Moody's letter.

"This transparent political ploy is just the latest example of Republicans attempting to keep Floridians disenfranchised," he said.

The aid to restore felons' voting rights is in addition to the $100 million that Bloomberg has committed to defeat Trump in Florida, which will be spent on voter turnout and outreach to Hispanic voters. Biden holds a slim, 1.3 percentage-point advantage over Trump in Florida, according to RealClearPolitics average of recent polls.

— With assistance by Mark Niquette
(Updates with FRRC comments from ninth paragraph.)

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